

MARY NEAL

By MAUD KARPELES

To the younger generation of folk dancers the name of Mary Neal, whose death on June 22nd at the age of 85 was recently announced in "The Times" will have little significance. To us older ones the news of her death arouses memories of the times when the revival of English folk dancing was in its infancy and controversies raged over the method of its upbringing.

Mary Neal played a great part in those stirring pioneer days. Her introduction to the dances was by way of the songs. She was on her own admission no musician, but her interest lay in providing suitable material for her club of working girls—the Esperance Club in Cumberland Market, St. Pancras.

In the autumn of 1905, she and Herbert MacIlwaine, the Club's Musical Director, came to Cecil Sharp for advice with regard to introducing into the Club the folk songs that he and others had collected. The experiment was made and proved a great success. After a fortnight Miss Neal wrote to Cecil Sharp that "the Club had gone mad; they were perfectly intoxicated with the music."

Her next step was to look for dances that would have an equal attraction. Cecil Sharp, with the vivid memory of the Morris Dances he had seen at Headington on Boxing Day in 1899 and with the tunes in his note-books, gave her an introduction to William Kimber. Miss Neal arranged for him and another traditional dancer to come to London to teach her Club girls, and the dances were performed by them at their Christmas party and in the following April at a public display in the Small Queen's Hall, when Cecil Sharp lectured. From then onwards the members of the Club continued to give performances in London and in the provinces, and the interest they aroused led to a number of the girls being sent out as teachers to towns and villages all over the country.

For the next eight years Miss Neal was active in propaganda, and she aroused enthusiasm for the dances which extended far beyond the Club circle and even touched the U.S.A. She founded an Association for the Revival and Practice of Folk Music which was afterwards superseded by the Esperance Morris Guild. In 1910 she published the "Esperance Morris Book," of which a second volume appeared in 1912. When the War broke out in 1914 the activities of the Guild were brought to a standstill and Miss Neal took little further part in the revival of folk dancing. In 1915 she published, in conjunction with Frank Kidson, "English Folk Song and Dance."

Cecil Sharp had no official connection with the Esperance Club, but for a few years he assisted by lecturing at their performances and by supervising the dancing in a general way, and, in collaboration with Herbert MacIlwaine, he published

the Headington dances in "The Morris Book," of which the first volume appeared in July, 1907.

The collaboration between Mary Neal and Cecil Sharp was short-lived. Friction between them arose at an early stage, and although both desired to work together the difference of outlook was too great. The School of Morris Dances, which Cecil Sharp founded at the Chelsea Physical Training College in the autumn of 1909 (two years before the formation of the E.F.D.S.), marked the final break.

What was the cause of the break? The clash of two dominant personalities possibly played a part, but the real cause was more deep-rooted. Mary Neal described it as the "age-long controversy, the difference between the form and the life, the pedant and those in touch with actual life itself." Sharp, on the other hand, proclaimed against the danger of "enthusiasm that is uninformed." "Philanthropy and art," he said, "have nothing in common, and to unite them spells disaster."

Mary Neal was essentially a philanthropist. She had a burning desire to bring happiness into the lives of others, and particularly those whose lot had fallen in drab and impoverished surroundings. Cecil Sharp was also a lover of his fellow-men, for all his diatribes against philanthropy. His desire was to bring into their lives the forms of artistic expression which were their birthright. What Miss Neal mistook in him for pedantry was his reverence for tradition. Mary Neal believed that to acquire a technique was to take away from the enjoyment of the dances. Cecil Sharp believed that technique and artistry are body and soul, matter and spirit, and that nearly all the troubles in the world come from the attempt to divorce the one from the other.

However mistaken we may feel Mary Neal's methods to be, it is only right that we should recognise and honour her for the contribution that she made to the folk dance revival. She and Herbert MacIlwaine were the first to take practical steps to revive the dances and her great organising ability stood her in good stead. Had it not been for Mary Neal there might have been a still longer delay before the dances played as big a part as the tunes and the songs in Cecil Sharp's programme. He was pre-eminently a musician and it was therefore natural that he should at first concentrate on the popularisation of the music. It is fair to say that Mary Neal showed him the way in which the Morris Dances might take their place side by side with the revival of folk music. At the same time it is, perhaps, not unfair to say that she missed the real significance of the revival because she failed to appreciate that the folk dance is the product of man's artistic nature and that it is in the practice of the dance as an art that enduring satisfaction and happiness are to be found.

Mary Neal was awarded the C.B.E. in 1937.